

OVER THE BORDER.

By WALTER BRYANT.

changed into a restlessness, and he must needs be up and doing something—it mattered not what. Then the restlessness disappeared, and he became again his old self, as cheerful, as sanguine, as confident, with no other change than a more settled dignity of bearing, caused by the belief, the complete delusion, that now his fortune was indeed made; that he possessed boundless wealth, and that he was going to leave London and to retire into the country, as many great merchants used to do, in order to enjoy it.

He was fully possessed with the idea that he was as wealthy as he ever desired to be. His poor brain was turned, indeed, on this point, and after a while I thought little of it, because we became accustomed to it, and because it seemed a harmless error. Yet it was not harmless, as you will hear. Indeed, even an innocent babe in arms may be made the instrument of mischief in the hands of a wicked man.

Our first visitor was Matthew Humble. He came first, he said, to pay his respects to my father. Then he began to come with great regularity. But I perceived soon, for I was no longer a child, but already a woman, that he had quite another object in view, for he cast his eyes upon me in such a way as no woman can mistake. Even to look upon those eyes of his made me then sick with loathing. Why, if this man had been another Apollo for beauty, I would not have regarded him, and so far was he from an Apollo that a fat and homely satyr more nearly resembled him.

He was already three or four and thirty, which I, being 17, regarded as a very great age indeed; and most Northumbrian folk are certainly married and the fathers of children already full before that time.

He was a man who made no friends, and lived alone with his sister Barbara. No girl at all, so far as I know, could boast of having received any attentions from him; he was supposed to care for nothing except money and strong drink. Every evening he sat by himself in the room which overlooks the river, with account books before him, and drank usquebaugh. But he loved brandy as well, or Hollanda, or rum, or indeed anything which was strong. And being naturally short of stature he was grown fat and gross, with long hanging cheeks, which made his small eyes look smaller, and more pig-like, a double chin, and a nose which already told a tale of deep potations, so red and swollen was it. What girl of 17 could regard with favor—even if there were no image of a brave and comely boy already impressed upon her heart—such a man as this, a mere tosetop and a drinker? And, worst of all, a secret and solitary drinker—a gloomy drinker.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LETTER AT LAST.

It was strange that, about the time when Ralph's disappearance was first heard of, rumors ran about the town that perhaps the mill would burn out, after all, to be the property of Matthew Humble; that these rumors were revived at the approach of Ralph's 21st birthday, and that again, when Matthew first began his approaches to me, the rumor was again circulated. By the help of the fugleman I traced these rumors to the barber, and still with his help—because every man must be shaved, and while being shaved, must talk—I traced these to none other than Matthew himself. He had, then, some object to gain. I knew not what at the time. Later on I discovered that his design was to make it appear—should Ralph ever return—that I had taken him for a husband, and owner of all, for I believed he allowed himself no doubt as to the result of his efforts. Both it not seem as if the uglier, the older, the less attractive a man is, whether in person or in mind, the more certain he becomes of conquering a woman's heart?

The rumor on this occasion was more certain and distinct than before. It was now stated that Mr. Emberton was discovered to have made a letter will, which had been proved, and was ready to be produced if necessary, that in this will the testator, after deploring the badness of heart manifested by his nephew Ralph, devised the whole of his property to his nephew Matthew. The barber, for his part had no doubt of the truth of this report, but those who asked Matthew whether it was true received mysterious answers, as that time would show, that in this world no one should be certain of anything, that every man should be certain of his own lip, that should an occasion arise the truth of the story would be tested, such oracles as baffle the hearers to believe all that has been said—and more. Barbara, his sister, for her own part, showed great willingness to answer any questions which might be put to her. But she knew little her brother, she said, was a close man, who sat much alone and spoke little.

And then the fugleman told me a very strange story indeed, and one which seemed to hold no good to any of us. By this time I so regarded Matthew that I could not believe he could do or design anything but evil. This was wrong, but he was most certainly a man of very evil disposition.

His own private business, the fugleman told me—this was nothing in the world, as I very well knew, but the marring of rabbits, hares, partridges, and other game on the banks of the river—led him some three past Morwick Mill. In the evening or late at night. There was a room in the mill—the same room in which Matthew was vanquished and beaten—the window of which looked out upon the river, which is here a broad and shallow brook. The bank rises steep on the other side, and is clothed with thick hanging woods in which no one ever walked except the fugleman, and he, for those purposes I have just mentioned, dresses alone and after sundown. Now his eyes were like unto the eyes of a hawk; they knew not distance; they could see, quite far off, little things as well as great things; and the fugleman saw, night after night, that Matthew Humble was sitting locked up in his room, engaged in writing or copying something. I believe that if the fugleman had known how to read, he would have read the writing even across the river. Unhappily, he had never learned that art.

copy, the fugleman said, of some other document. But what that document was he could not tell. It was something on large sheets of paper, and in big handwriting. He wrote very slowly, comparing word for word with the papers which he seemed copying. Once when there was a noise as of some one at the door, he hid all the papers together, and with them away in a corner quickly and with an averted air. He was therefore doing something secret, which means something wicked. What could it be?

"Little he thinks," said the fugleman, "that Master Ralph is sure to come home and confound his knavish tricks, and trip up his heels for him. Ah, I think I see him now, in lace and ruffles and good brocade, both walking up the street with a fine city madam on his arm."

I should have been very well contented with the lace ruffles and good brocade—indeed, I wanted nothing better—but I wanted no fine city madam at the mill.

Let us on I learned what this thing was which he took so long to copy, and which gave him so much anxiety. But it was like a five ship driven back by the wind into the vessels of those who sent it forth.

One morning when I was busy in the kitchen with household work, and my mother was engaged upon the family sewing, Matthew came and begged to have some conversation with her. He said that, first of all, he was fully acquainted with her circumstances, and the unhappy outlook before her, when my grandmother should die and leave us all without any income at all, that being of a compassionate heart, he was strongly minded to help them, and that the best way, as well as he could judge, would be to make her daughter Drusilla his wife. This done, he would then see that their later years would be attended with comfort and the relief of all anxiety.

At first my mother did not reply. She had no reason to love Matthew, whose unkindness to his ward was well known to her. Again, she had still some remains of family pride left—she did not destroy a woman's pride by taking away her money. She thought, being the daughter of a well-to-do London citizen, that her child should look higher than a man who had nothing in the world of his own, but thirty acres of land, although he lived at the mill and pretended to be its owner. And she very truly thought that the man was not in person likely to attract so young a girl as myself. But she spoke him fair. She told him that I was young as yet, too young to know my own mind, and that perhaps he had better wait. He replied that he was not young, for his own part, and that he would not wait. Then she told him that she should not, certainly, force the inclinations of her daughter, but that she would speak to me about him.

She opened the subject to me in the evening. No sooner did I understand that Matthew had spoken for me than I threw myself upon my knees to my mother, and implored her with many tears and protestations not to urge me to accept his suit. I declared with vehemence, that if there were no other man in the world, I could not accept Matthew Humble. I reminded her of his behavior toward Ralph. I assured her that I believed him to be one who sat drinking by himself, and a plotter of evil, a man with a hardened heart, and a dead conscience. Well, my mother shed tears with me, and said that I should not be married against my will; that Matthew was not a good man, and that she would bid him, not unceremoniously, go look elsewhere. This she did, thanking him for the honor he had proposed.

For some reason, perhaps because he did not really wish to marry me, perhaps because he had not thoroughly laid out the scheme of marrying me to revenge himself upon Ralph, Matthew gave me no respite for the time, though I went in great terror lest he might pester my mother or myself. Perhaps, which I think more likely, he trusted to the influence of poverty and privation, and was contented to wait till these should make me submissive to his will.

However that may be, he said nothing more concerning love, and continued his visits to my father, in whose conversation he took so great a pleasure. Oh, villainal! Things were in this posture, I being in the greatest anxiety and fear that something terrible was going before long to happen to us, when a most joyful and unexpected event happened.

It was in the month of May, seven years since Ralph's flight—like the followers of Mohammed, I reckoned the years from the flight—that this event happened.

The event was this, that the fugleman had a letter sent to him—the first letter he ever received in his life.

I saw the post boy riding down the road early in the afternoon; he passed by the house of Mr. Carnaby, who, he sometimes stopped, put our cottages, where he never stopped because there was nobody who wrote letters to us, and over the bridge, his horse's hoofs clattering under the old gateway. I thought he was going to the vicarage, but he left that on his right and rode straight up the street, blowing his horn as he went. I wondered, but had no time to get a letter in that part of the town. The letter, in fact, was for no other than the fugleman.

Half an hour later the fugleman, who had been at work in the garden all the morning, came down the town again, and asked me—with respect to her ladyship, my mother—if I would give him five minutes' talk. With him was Sallor Nan, 'cause the thing was altogether so strange that he could not avoid telling her about it, and she came with him, curious as a woman, though bold and brave as becomes an old maid.

"'Tis a strange thing," said the fugleman, turning the unopened letter over and over in his hand; "'tis a strange thing; here is a letter which tells me I know not what—comes from I know not where. I have paid three shillings and eight pence for it. A great sum, I doubt I was a fool. It may mean money, and it may mean loss."

"Turn it, and let it be done," said Sallor Nan. "'Tis from some land shark. Turn the letter."

"'Tis an old, or maybe 70 years of age. Sixty, I must a-be. You saw and certain, 60. 'Tis never a letter in all my days before."

Now, which is very singular, not the least singular in our minds as to the writer of the letter.

"'Tis it," I asked, "from a cousin or a brother?"

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Lindsay, July 4, 1888.—1592.

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" 12x24 " \$1 "
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